WOMEN AND PROPERTY IN THE EIGHTEENTH-CENTURY ENGLISH NOVEL

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CHAPTER I

"Clarissa" and the georgic mode

From the beginning of the novel, Clarissa's relation to property is represented figuratively, in the sense of those qualities she possesses as an individual, and literally, in the estate she has inherited from her grandfather. The terms of the grandfather's bequest make clear his commitment to a conservative understanding of property; for him, land confers dignity on and grants agency to its possessor. The will establishes that she may at eighteen leave the "great part of his estate to whom she pleases of the family, and the rest of it (if she die single) at her own discretion." His motive is "to create respect for her" as a shield against the envy that her goodness may attract.[1] His action expresses faith in her possession of a virtue that is not compelled or expedient, but innate and constructive. The note detailing the events leading to the inheritance suggests, moreover, that during his lifetime the grandfather secured his title to her time by publicly expressing the value of her labor: "in order to invite her to him as often as her other friends would spare her, [he] indulged her in erecting and fitting-up a dairy-house in her own taste. When finished, it was so much admired for its elegant simplicity and convenience that the whole seat, before of old time from its situation called *The Grove*, was generally known by the name of *The Dairy-house*" (41).

Clarissa's acts of possession can be seen as doubly metonymic. They change from the figurative ownership implicit in her "erecting and fitting-up [the] dairy-house in her own taste" to the literal inheritance of the entire estate. The name change which testifies to her constructive powers confirms that process of association on which metonymy depends. It also takes us out of the world of nature (The Grove) and "places us in the historical world of events and situations."[2] Here, as Margaret Anne Doody writes, the "man-made" is privileged over the "natural." Doody reads this as an "anti-romantic, anti-pastoral" gesture.[3] More constructively, we can see that the change of name

sanctions the value of labor as conferring meaning on both person and place.

The process by which The Grove becomes The Dairy-house, in which pastoral place name becomes a site of productivity, thus realizes the terms of Locke's famous discussion of property in chapter 5 of the *Two Treatises of Government*: "Whatsoever, then, [man] removes out of the State that Nature hath provided, and left it in, he hath mixed his *Labour* with, and joyned to it something that is his own, and thereby makes it his *Property*." That "which is his own" is the property each man possesses uniquely in his individual self. To illustrate his point, Locke invokes the analogy of gathering acorns and apples "from the Trees in the Wood," asking: "Was it a Robbery thus to assume to himself what belonged to all in Common?" To return a negative is to admit "that 'tis the taking any part of what is common, and removing it out of the state Nature leaves it in, which *begins the Property* . . ."[4] In Joyce Appleby's reading of the passage, Locke refutes the central tenets of Filmer's *Patriarcha* by establishing as privileged the inalienable right of self-possession: "Our property in ourselves is not shared in common, and through our own exertions – our labor – we make from common property private property."[5]

For the Harlowe family, the natural rights argument that "the labour . . . *made* his *Property* who takes that pains about it"[6] is secondary to the imperatives of primogeniture and "family-aggrandizement" (152). From their perspective, Clarissa's claim to independent selfhood must yield to the more customary Lockean argument for male domination over women.[7] This strain of natural rights theorizing about property reads the female body as itself a kind of property. Accordingly, Clarissa's utility will be realized in a marriage that secures the coherence of the family estates. This sense is endorsed by the anonymous author of *Critical Remarks on "Sir Charles Grandison," "Clarissa," and "Pamela,"* who contends that Clarissa's value rests unconditionally on her physical intactness:

> This chastity, this delicacy, &c. may probably enough be termed political; some people have reckoned it the meer invention of the statesman or politician; but . . . its fitness and propriety are founded on the nature of things and of human society. In all societies there are families, inheritances, and distinctions of ranks and orders. To keep these separate and distinct, to prevent them from falling into confusion, on all which the good oeconomy and internal happiness of the state much depend, the chastity and continence of women are absolutely and indispensably necessary. Therefore it has been universally agreed, to educate the sex in the principles leading to that continence, and to make their honour and reputation consist in adhering to them. In women of condition, in short in

all above a certain rank, the inconveniencies of deviating from these principles are always very observable, and sensibly felt; particular families are hurt, orders are confused, inheritances are uncertain, the example is bad, and the scandal great. Therefore in all such we perceive this political chastity strongly to prevail; but in the rank below them we find it, for obvious reasons, exerting no great influence.[8]

As this passage makes clear in its closing reference to those of the "rank below" women of "condition," it is extrinsic political circumstance that compels chastity and its more visible correlative, delicacy. The constitutive power of female sexuality within the "nature of things" threatens to disable the higher good of the "internal happiness of the state." The defense of this higher good, enabled by the rule of property, requires woman's internalization of propriety as a check against her innate sexuality. By this reckoning, Clarissa becomes an outcast from the order of both her family and the state itself.

The terms of her grandfather's settlement speak to a contrary relation between female self and social good, in which women have a more active power to do good. Before his death, his view apparently prevailed within Clarissa's immediate family. The Harlowes seemed also to acknowledge her claim to a distinct identity based on the pleasures of continuous and actively engaged labor, and not just on the mere fulfillment of her role as daughter, niece, and granddaughter. In her superintendence of the household, as her mother described it, Clarissa's attention to "family cares" was "richly repaid in the reputation your skill and management have given you" (94).

But the inheritance of the estate (which appears to Clarissa the true object of Solmes's "love") alters her place within the family economy. In attaching a palpable reward to "reputation," the grandfather's bequest grants her potential agency as a property owner. The transformative and civilizing capacity of individual effort formalized in the name change (from The Grove to the Dairy-house) has also, and more dangerously, led to Clarissa's own change of status. The Harlowes respond with a narrowly prescriptive assertion of her subordinate role as daughter and of her moral obligation to defer to their wish that she marry Solmes. Her resistance ultimately brings to bear on her the force of what the anonymous author calls the system of "political chastity." The inheritance of the Dairy-house, intended as a tribute to individual integrity, in fact sets in motion the plot of exile that leads inexorably to her rape, and to her final entry into her spiritual "father's house."

Surprisingly, twentieth-century commentary has echoed the terms of

"political chastity" in assigning to Clarissa an instrumental function. Since in her world property serves as "a metaphor for woman and a synecdoche for male hegemony over her," the bequest renders the heroine a "man–woman, an adult–child, a propertied property."[9] The legal synonymy between the terms "woman" and "property" enables a web of affiliations in which the seemingly opposed interests of a James Harlowe or a Robert Lovelace become one; this has the effect, as Terry Eagleton has written, of making Clarissa the "discourse" of the text, "magically unchanging in itself yet source of 'magical' transformations in others."[10] She is thus represented as object of others' acts of self-construction, rather than as agent in her own right. But it is only partly the case that Clarissa is enmeshed by her antagonists' desires.

Richardson also establishes for Clarissa a prior history in which her identity is achieved by a methodical and productive use of time. The "erecting and fitting-up [the] dairy-house" and the terms of her grandfather's will are of a piece with her attentiveness to the poor as well as her "particular distribution of her time," by which, "had she calculated according to the practice of *too many*, she had actually lived more years at *sixteen*, than *they* had at *twenty-six*" (1469–70). The paralysis induced by the crisis of "courtship" is bracketed in the novel by a more purposive construction of labor, embodied most perfectly in Clarissa herself.

Analysis of *Clarissa* through reference to the eighteenth-century understanding of property was pioneered by Christopher Hill, whose approach was subsequently developed by Ian Watt and Terry Eagleton. More recently, J. G. A. Pocock's civic humanist discourse has afforded critics such as John Barrell and John Zomchick a more sophisticated paradigm for the relation of property to civic identity.[11] Pocock's model describes eighteenth-century thought as organized by a dialectical relation of ancient to modern conceptions of property in which the citizen patriot's virtue, secured by the leisure and impartiality granted by the possession of land, defines itself in opposition to the "[s]pecialized, acquisitive, and post-civic" man of commerce, feminized by his passionate enthrallment to mobile or "imaginary" property.[12] The residual aristocratic code with which Lovelace is aligned – and the near-parodic emulation of it that drives the Harlowes' acquisitiveness – functions in the text as a corruption of this patriot ideal.

We understand the qualities of such corruption by contrast with Clarissa's exemplary expression of her inward virtue in the form of purposive labor. This location of her integrity in the practice of an industriousness, externalized in the caring for her poor and internalized

in scrupulous self-questioning, recalls the "modern identity" anatomized by Charles Taylor. The "punctual self," developed through the writings of Locke, follows from the period's "affirmation of ordinary life" and of the "powers of disengaged reason – with its associated ideals of self-responsible freedom and dignity – of self-exploration, and of personal commitment." In its capacity for self-making, it exists in fundamental opposition to the civic humanist circumscription of personality by antecedent notions of disinterested virtue. And in its participation in the embourgeoisement of eighteenth-century culture, it reveals the dynamic reciprocity between real property, on the one hand, and consciousness, on the other.[13]

The central importance accorded Locke in the story of the eighteenth century told by Taylor is consistent with that of another skeptical reader of civic humanism, Joyce Appleby. Her study of seventeenth-century economic writing leads her to conclude that while arguments between court and country dominated political discourse in the early eighteenth century "fragments of the liberal paradigm found lodging in other inquiries." The Machiavellian moment of historical consciousness that defined the experience of the English ruling class, and that led to the affirmation of the "patriot citizen," did not speak to those "outside the political nation." For them, the classical paradigm of a revived republicanism was secondary to the individualist model of society propounded by Locke and his successors. Reacting against the limitations of Whig historiography, revisionist critics like Pocock have, according to Appleby, employed an unnecessarily narrow definition of political thought that depresses the significance of the "originators of liberal ideas" who began with a "critical stance toward government regulation of the economy, [and] ended up with propositions subversive to traditional authority and those privileged to exercise that authority both at court and in the country."[14]

Historians of the middle class – the class most aware of its status "outside the political nation" – provide further evidence for the emergence by mid-century of a distinctive mentality for which the construct of civic humanism proves inadequate. As Paul Langford has recently noted, while the "respect which attended property was a striking feature of the mental landscape of the eighteenth century," the battle waged between the defenders of the landed and the moneyed interest was principally confined to the decades of the 1690s and 1700s and had essentially ceased by the mid-Georgian period.[15] Thereafter the emphasis fell less on divisions between kinds of property and more on its

capacity to civilize, a capacity voiced most eloquently by the Scottish Enlightenment thinkers for whom property is, in the words of Adam Ferguson, "a matter of progress" and a "principal distinction of nations in the advanced state of mechanic and commercial arts."[16]

Historians have given little attention, however, to the ways in which the georgic mode provided the eighteenth century with a vocabulary that inscribed this "progress" within the terms of a continuous tradition. Virgil's representation of man as "a hard laborious Kind" (line 95), envisioned his fall from a state of pastoral ease to unremitting effort as at once loss and gain. The ending of the Golden Age was the necessary condition for the emergence of human inventiveness:

> The Sire of Gods and Men, with hard Decrees,
> Forbids our Plenty to be bought with Ease:
> And wills that Mortal Men, inur'd to toil,
> Shou'd exercise, with pains, the grudging Soil.
> Himself invented first the shining Share,
> And whetted Humane Industry by Care:
> Himself did Handy-Crafts and Arts ordain;
> Nor suffer'd Sloath to rust his active Reign.
> E're this, no Peasant vex'd the peaceful Ground;
> Which only Turfs and Greens for Altars found:
> No Fences parted Fields, nor Marks nor Bounds
> Distinguish'd Acres of litigious Grounds:
> But all was common, and the fruitful Earth
> Was free to give her unexacted Birth.
> *Jove* added Venom to the Viper's Brood,
> And swell'd, with raging Storms, the peaceful Flood:
> Commission'd hungry Wolves t'infest the Fold,
> And shook from Oaken Leaves the liquid Gold:
> Remov'd from Humane reach the chearful Fire,
> And from the Rivers bade the Wine retire:
> That studious Need might useful Arts explore;
> From furrow'd Fields to reap the foodful Store:
> And force the Veins of clashing Flints t'expire
> The lurking Seeds of their Coelestial Fire.
> ...
> And various Arts in order did succeed,
> (What cannot endless Labour urg'd by need?)
>
> (II.183–218)

Embracing the progressivist implications of this model, the eighteenth century adapted the classical theme of labor as a civilizing agent. In

response to the imperatives of capitalist enterprise, labor was accorded the capacity to regenerate both the citizen and the state. Spenser, Jonson, and Milton, encouraged by the spirit of the New Science and religious reform, had earlier depreciated pastoral and epic relative to alternative models of "virtuous and heroic behaviour" that anticipated Augustan interpretations of *Georgics*.[17] Thomson, Pope, Dyer, Grainger, and Gay, in turn, variously develop the possibilities of the Virgilian ideal of moderation in order to stigmatize acquisitive excess and defend the right uses of wealth. Critical attention has, in the main, focused on poetry as the period's chosen vehicle for expressing the Virgilian ethos.[18] But georgic is, as Anthony Low comments, "primarily a mode rather than a genre. It is an informing spirit, an attitude toward life, and a set of themes and images rather than anything so definite, say, as a four-book didactic poem of two thousand lines on the subject of agriculture."[19] And as such, it appears pervasively in the novel as well as poetry.

In *Clarissa*, the only direct allusion to *Georgics* occurs in the opening pages as James Harlowe and Clarissa debate the limits of his authority over her. At issue is the existence of female integrity and its sufficiency as a guide to action. Clarissa's refusal to meet with Roger Solmes, the Harlowes' chosen suitor for their daughter, has provoked from James an account of the family's plan to overcome her resistance. "[I]t is resolved that you shall go to your uncle Anthony's," he writes:

> If after one fortnight's conversation with Mr. Solmes, and after you have heard what your friends shall further urge in his behalf, unhardened by clandestine correspondence, you shall convince them that Virgil's *amor omnibus idem* (for the application of which I refer you to the Georgic, as translated by Dryden) is verified in you, as well as in the rest of the animal creation; and that you cannot, or will not, forego your prepossession in favour of the moral, the virtuous, the pious Lovelace (I would please you if I could!), it will then be considered, whether to humour you, or to renounce you for ever. (218)

James's allusion to a universal sexual appetite refers to Virgil's description of the "Force of Love" in Book III of *Georgics*. In the influential 1697 translation, to which James refers, Dryden renders the passage as:

> Thus every Creature, and of every Kind,
> The secret Joys of sweet Coition find:
> Not only Man's Imperial Race; but they
> That wing the liquid Air, or swim the Sea,
> Or haunt the Desart, rush into the flame:
> For Love is Lord of all; and is in all the same.
>
> (III.375–80)

Clarissa responds to James's insult in two distinct registers, each rhetorically consistent with her sense of her correspondents. To her friend and confidante, Anna Howe, she voices sharp anger, but adds her recognition that James's imprudent comment has allowed her to seize the offensive. Emphasizing her politic recognition of the advantage to be garnered from his deviousness, she declares her intention to use "a piece of the art they accuse me of" to foil the "master-stroke of my brother's policy." She intends deliberately to take umbrage at "his vile hint from the Georgic" in order "to palliate the refusal of obeying" the demand that she prepare to leave for her uncle Anthony's. To James himself she levels the charge of puerile cleverness; his sexual allusion functions merely "to display your pedantry" and breaches that "*humanity*" that was supposed to be "a branch of your studies at the university" (218–19).

Contemporary commentary on Dryden's translations of Virgil reinforces the eccentricity of James's choice of tag, and justifies both Clarissa's response to James's misapplied learning and her resistance to his use of sexuality as a master trope.[20] But, in practice, her tactical maneuvers depend on her family's compliance with the idea of a distinctive female "delicacy" (220). To affirm her own participation in the culture of politeness, she must thus construe James's reading of human nature as a form of misogyny. In declaring herself "entitled to resent [the] infamous hint … for the sake of my sex as for my own" (219), she locates her claim to individual integrity in the context of what he believes to be an entirely factitious "delicacy," "purity," and "virgin modesty" (223).[21]

But the affective terms of discussion prove to be property, not politeness. James's denial of an inwardly defined female virtue is peripheral to his overriding concern with the material benefits of chastity. Clarissa's investment of "matrimonial duty" with the concerns of the "*soul*" seems to him irrelevant to "the light in which this whole debate ought to be taken." And so, with a great flourish, he closes down the debate, by declaring the definitive terms that govern her meaning to be those of "PROPERTY" (220).

The Harlowes and Lovelace unite in their common reliance on a rhetoric that at once conflates women and property and justifies their actions. From the Harlowes' perspective, Lovelace's declaration that Clarissa is "*his*, and *shall* be *his*, and he will be the death of any man who robs him of his PROPERTY," must be met by the "absolutely determined" counter-claim of "the right of a father in his child."[22] If "Love is Lord of all" and if Clarissa has proven her susceptibility by "prefer[ing] the rake

to a father," then the father is justified in taking whatever measures necessary to prove his superior title to the property of his daughter.

From the start, however, an alternate interpretation of property relations centered on conditional rather than absolute or prescribed rights has defined Clarissa's sense of her place within the family. In the energetic cultivation of property, real and personal, Clarissa affirms the value of her labor. This recalls the emphasis within the georgic mode on the capacity of individuals to invest the quotidian with meaning. Her affirmation acquires additional power from the tenacity with which she defends such precepts. Even at the end of her life, she resists the lure of expedient compromise and asserts the primary value of her integrity. Justifying to Anna Howe her decision "never to have Mr. Lovelace," she thus declares:

> Had I been his but a *month*, he must have possessed the estate on which my relations had set their hearts; the more to their regret, as they hated *him* as much as he hated *them*.
>
> Had I not reason, these things considered, to think myself happier without Mr. Lovelace than with him? My will too unviolated; and very little, nay, not anything as to him, to reproach myself with? (1161–2)

The consolations of the unviolated will and the unalienated estate remind the reader again of the appropriateness of the "principal device" of the design Clarissa has etched on her coffin: "a crowned serpent, with its tail in its mouth, forming a ring, the emblem of eternity," circling the inscription of her name, her age, and the date, April 10th, on which she left "her father's house" (1305–6). Clarissa marks her end by returning us to the context of the novel's beginning: the daughter who claims her integrity in opposition to the familial demand that she yield to their desire to consolidate estates.

Richardson's exploration of the power of making through the experiences of a female protagonist is a recurrent feature of eighteenth-century narrative. As Fielding's Sophia Western and Amelia Booth, Radcliffe's Emily St. Aubert, and Holcroft's Anna St. Ives suggest, women consistently serve as the vehicle for testing the possibilities of an individualist ethic. But their purposiveness and verity are finally made subordinate to their narrative function, either as agents of the hero's transformation into a member of the landed gentry or as foil to his failure to discharge the range of responsibilities such membership entails. In the first instance, marriage marks the heroine's end; in the second, death and apotheosis. Nancy Miller, in a paradigmatic reading

of *Pamela* and *Clarissa*, encodes these alternate plots as euphoric and dysphoric, as structures signaling social advancement in the one case and alienation in the other.[23] But in the eighteenth-century novel, gender and genre are mutually informing and also expressive of wider cultural practices unified by a fundamental concern with property.

Such practices allow us to contextualize *Clarissa*'s depiction of property relations through a plot centered on an eminently marriageable eighteen-year old woman. The juridical equation of wives and property offers one perspective; in Blackstone's famous phrase, "By marriage, the husband and wife are one person in law; that is, the very being or legal existence of the woman is suspended during the marriage, or at least is incorporated and consolidated into that of the husband."[24] On the threshold of legal extinction, Clarissa claims title to an inwardness that she believes licenses her participation in the choice of a husband. The "mixing of her labour" with the things of this world seems to her to affirm the prerogatives of both self-possession and individual agency. Juxtaposed against this subjectivity is the imminent fact of her status as object, dependent on the determining power of her spouse. To put this in the terms of the recurring double plot of the eighteenth-century novel: the range of possibilities opened up by the experience of "courtship" will be closed down by the subordination of the heroine in a concluding marriage or death. Or, to adapt a more abstract frame: the body of the novel engages a Lockean understanding of property as an active process of making, and does so by locating the heroine's experiences within the context of the georgic mode. The ending of the novel offers instead an obverse, civic humanist reading of property as denominating selfhood, and as therefore granting exclusive authority to confer meaning to the male character.

We may then propose that woman textualizes male anxiety about social and economic change. The emergent order construes woman as possessed of distinctive qualities that originate in continuous negotiation with experience. The residual order defines her as a form of property whose meaning reflects the need to secure patterns of inheritance. In incorporating both of these paradigms, the novel enables "woman" to express many of the ambivalences common to a bourgeois culture marked by the wish to accommodate stability and continuity to the imperatives of aspiration and emulation.

Virgilian georgic, Anthony Low maintains, is centrally "a poetry that reflects on the making of history."[25] The generic transliteration that enabled georgic's appropriation by the "new manner of writing" is in a

very particular way bound up with the cultural history of the eighteenth century, the period that saw the "rise of the novel." Many recent critics – Nancy Armstrong and John Bender among them – press the notion of an altered literary field into the service of a much larger claim: they ascribe to the novel a remarkable capacity to effect historical change. I hesitate before that claim. The terms of the argument sketched above do suggest significant conjunctions of fiction and history. These can best be explored, however, not through totalizing assertion but through close readings that show how and why the eighteenth-century novel so consistently envisions the labor of women in relation to their value as property.